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DE RUEHBW #1551 3191647  
ZNY CCCCC ZZH (CCY ADX2DB0A2 WSC9532-623)  
R 151647Z NOV 07  
FM AMEMBASSY BELGRADE  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 1776  
INFO RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE

C O N F I D E N T I A L BELGRADE 001551

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E.O. 12958: DECL 11/14/2017  
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [SR](#) [KV](#) [BK](#)  
SUBJECT: (S) SERBIA: SANDZAK SIMMERS WHILE FIGHTING MUFTIS VIE FOR  
U.S. SUPPORT

REF: A) BELGRADE 1394, B) BELGRADE 1392

Classified By: DCM Jennifer Brush, reasons 1.4 (b,d)

#### Summary

1. (C) Serbia's Islamic community in the Sandzak region continues to feud over financial and political control of the local community while the opposing religious leaders try to enlist U.S. support. What started as a power grab by one faction of imams supported by Belgrade apparently has spun out of control and now both sides believe that U.S. backing is key if they are to prevail in this growing row. The United States has no equities in who wins the dispute, but has a strong interest in encouraging its resolution in order to deter further violence, further destabilizing the already vulnerable security of Serbia. End Summary.

#### Muftis' Explain their Positions for U.S. Support

2. (C) Following the violence in October after the Belgrade-inspired removal of Serbia's Chief Mufti, Muamer Zukorlic, and the subsequent investiture of Mufti Adem Zilkic as Reis -- head of all Muslims of Serbia (Ref A), the two sides sought U.S. support for their positions. Belgrade-based Mufti Mohammed Jusufspahic and newly inaugurated Reis Zilkic told the DCM on November 13 that the situation in the Sandzak remained tense and accused Zukorlic of instigating further violence. Explaining their rationale for inaugurating Zilkic, both said their goal was to create a Reis for all of Serbia who would bring together the various ethnic groups of Serbia's Islamic community, rather than the previous system in which Serbia's Islamic community was subordinate to Reis in Sarajevo. Both Zilkic and Jusufspahic acknowledged that whoever directed Serbia's Islamic community would also have a significant control over sizeable property holdings, which could return to the community after Serbia implements a restitution law in October 2008.

3. (C) In a separate meeting the same night, Zukorlic told DCM that, in addition to Jusufspahic, Prime Minister Vojislav Kostunica and Novi Pazar Mayor Suleyman Ugljanin, were behind his removal because they were threatened by Zukorlic's popular influence in the Sandzak, after his 14 years as Mufti. Zukorlic said the land holdings of the community were minimal, accounting for "only a few hectares," though he conceded the property was favorably located and valuable. Zukorlic asked for U.S. support, believing the U.S. had supported him in his previous disputes with the government.

#### Outside Influences already at Play

4. (C) Both sides said outside forces were already at play in the region. Zilkic accused Zukorlic of being an ethnic Albanian and a "Wahhabist," who was supporting other extremists to destabilize the situation. Zukorlic downplayed the role of extremists in the Sandzak,

saying that they were mostly "frustrated locals," but added that Zilkic supported Wahhabisms. Zukorlic noted, however, that Iranians had met with him after a recent visit by U.S. emboffs, and they had offered to play a mediating role in the dispute. He said the Iranians told him that he was getting too close to the United States.

The DCM stated to both parties that the United States had no stake in this intra-religious community feud, but remained very concerned that the feud could lead to further violence, leading to further destabilization in Serbia.

Comment

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15. (C) Both sides are pressing whatever buttons they believe will get them U.S. backing in this dispute. Neither says anything about religion, it is all about politics and land. But both sides are also armed and can gin up angry mobs at will. What may have begun as a clumsy attempt by the Belgrade Islamic community to get their hands on traditional Islamic holdings in the Sandzak, now apparently has spun out of anyone's control, hence their appeals to the Embassy to take sides and solve the dispute. Post is increasingly concerned about the potential for additional, greater violence in the Sandzak as the conflict boils and as each side seeks to enlist others to their cause. Post will continue to encourage calm and dialogue to cool tensions, but sees no resolution to the conflict without some neutral entity's mediation. End Comment.

MUNTER